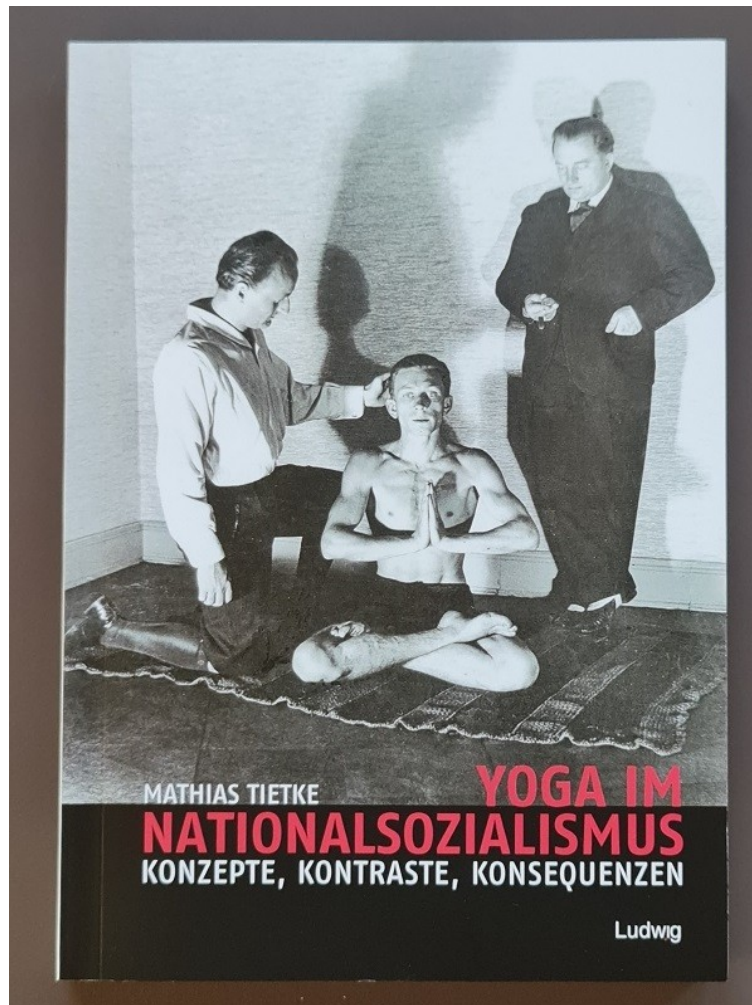


Yoga im Nationalsozialismus – Konzepte, Kontraste, Konsequenzen“ („Yoga during the times of National Socialism“ [my translation], in German) by Matias Tietke (book review)



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by Matthias Schmidt | 22. Mar. 2021 | -English Blog-Post, Book reviews, Buchbesprechung

This is another review of a book in German that I am also posting in English. Despite the book's language, perhaps the information contained is of interest. Or maybe you are also able to read German when the subject is of sufficient interest to you.

Matias Tietke shares six letters of his first name with me. He has also been born in the same year, even though he was born in a then different country, the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Another commonality is that he is also a conscientious objector – which definitely took more courage to be in the former GDR than in the Federal Republic of Germany during the 70s.

According to Wikipedia, Matias Tietke started to travel internationally after reunification, mainly to India. Between 1994 and 1998 he became a yoga teacher (Union of German Yoga Teachers, BDY and European Yoga Union, EYU). In addition to teaching yoga, he is currently working as a journalist and as a book author. My library also contains another book by him: *Der Stammbaum des Yoga*, ("The family tree of yoga", my translation) published 2007 by Theseus-Verlag.

His book about yoga during National Socialism is relatively fast to read, small format, 229 pages. It is relatively academic reading, mainly of interest for people with an interest in history - and you should not expect any sensational insights.

Romantic idealization of yoga, already 200 years ago

The book starts with a period long before National Socialism; Tietke describes the fascination of German poets and philosophers with the first translations of the ancient Indian writings into German at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. The Bhagavad Gita was translated into German for the first time in 1806. Herder, Schelling, Nietzsche, also Schopenhauer, they all were enthusiastic - including, according to Tietke, quite some romantic idealization and projection. In this relatively early period one can already find the basic ideas about Aryans, the "master race" and purity of race, later also with Nietzsche.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the theosophists around Helena Blavatsky made the broader public aware of yoga and Indian philosophy. They propagated their own mixture of Hindu and Buddhist elements on the one hand and Western esoteric and occult elements on the other hand. In the chapter of the book dedicated to the theosophists, Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy is briefly mentioned. He originally belonged to that circle, and he broke with them and founded his own movement due to the plans around young Krishnamurti (see my blog on "risks and side effects of truth").

Tietke then extensively discusses the (still quite limited) yoga activities in Germany during the 1920s and the early 30s. Yoga was promoted through lectures about "mental yoga" and through circus performances with "authentic Indian yogis".

The first yoga school in Germany

The first German yoga school for hatha yoga was opened in Berlin, at the end of the 20s, by Boris Sacharow (born originally in the Ukraine, later having fled to Germany from post-revolutionary Russia). One of his students was Johannes Schultz, the founder of autogenic training.

Tietke then describes in several small chapters the proponents and the opponents of yoga during the time of National Socialism. One of the fiercest opponents was Dr. Mathilde Ludendorff, a medical doctor (second wife of general Ludendorff, who was quite famous in Germany for his role in the second half of world war I). For her yoga was „induzierter Irrsinn“ ("induced lunacy", my translation).

Himmler and the Bhagavad Gita

As for the higher echelon of the Nazi hierarchy, Tietke mentions Alfred Rosenberg, the main ideologist of the "movement", and Heinrich Himmler, to whom he dedicates an entire chapter. He shows convincingly that for Heinrich Himmler the Bhagavad Gita was a main justification for the atrocities that he committed, especially for the Holocaust.

Heinrich Himmler

Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-S72707 / CC-BY-SA 3.0

Adolph Hitler is also mentioned briefly – he read and appreciated the Upanishads. As for Hitler's long-time lover Eva Braun (they married a few days before they committed suicide together), Tietke does not accept that the relatively well-known pictures showing her in bridge pose or in forward bend prove that she really practiced yoga. In his view, she might also just have done some form of gymnastics.

The Hakenkreuz (the Nazi svastika) has nothing to do with the Indian svastikas

Tietke also doubts that the Indian svastika symbols (used there as lucky symbols) inspired the Hakenkreuz, the svastika symbol used by the Nazis. He argues that this kind of symbol has been used for millennia in many cultures across almost all continents. According to Tietke, Hitler took the svastika from the German folkish-national movement as a Germanic rune and an antisemitic symbol. He had it put on the party banner of the NSDAP in 1920 and later on the flag of the Third Reich.

The book is the product of extensive research. With footnotes and exact documentation it sometimes reads more like an academic publication. This does not necessarily facilitate reading. However, should you have an interest in the early history of yoga in Germany, especially during the time of National Socialism, this book offers you the fruit of intensive study of both the reception of yoga in the 20s and 30s as well as of the elements of yoga philosophy (for instance the Indian caste system and the concept of superiority of certain races) that were well fitting to the ideology of National Socialism.

During the recent demonstrations of the self-proclaimed anti-corona "Querdenker" ("lateral thinkers", my translation), some articles claimed that part of the yoga scene has been easily attracted by right wing ideology. There is even under the heading „Shantifa“ an initiative in the general yoga scene against such fascist attitudes amongst practitioners of yoga. The book was used as a supporting argument for this claim.

In my view, the book does not really contribute arguments that yoga in itself carries a special attractiveness of people with a far-right ideology. The closeness of the "master race" imagery of National Socialism and the traditional Indian caste system is already well known. Beyond that, I cannot deduce any "special magnetism from yoga" for fascist thinking based on the arguments in this book.

One could with equal or even better right claim that yoga practitioners are especially open for green concepts, as an increase in body consciousness and emotional sensitivity creates more awareness for the climate change initiated by mankind. In the majority of cases environmental awareness and fascist attitudes are mutually exclusive, as far as I can observe.

It may well be that a certain type of personality (for instance people longing for authority and order) is attracted to yoga. Still, this is not the only type of personality which is attracted – and anyway, not everybody with such a personality type would be drawn to far right ideologies.

What was this quote again by Patthabi Jois? “Ashtanga Yoga is for everybody, just not for lazy people.”